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# Kenneth Anger

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*INTERVIEW:*

Kenneth Anger was interviewed on May 10, 1979.

*CA: Was your childhood relatively normal*?

*ANGER*: For Hollywood puritans, yes. Very odd family. Presbyterians. No smoking or drinking. Also no comic books; I wasn't supposed to have them. They tried to bring me up on Tennyson, things like that. I was a Depression baby. I arrived with bad news about the stock market, February 3, 1930.

*CA: When did you become interested in films*?

*ANGER*: I think I started seeing my first movies when I was three or four years old. I was in dance school already: expressive dancing. My parents were both university graduates. They had definite ideas about what I could and could not do. Everyone thinks that everyone in Hollywood is throwing wild parties and carrying on; they aren't. My parents were puritanical; they looked down on it.

*CA*: *When did you decide to enter the film world*?

*ANGER*: When I was selected by Warner Brothers to play the changeling prince in Max Reinhardt's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in 1934. I was a little kid about three feet tall. The part was not a speaking part; it was a dancing and mime part. It is a beautiful film.

The thing that I really remember about working on "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at four years old was the day the cellophane moon beam caught on fire. Because to me that was sort of magical. The arc lights were too close to the stretched cellophane that the children were supposed to run down. There were steel steps hidden beneath the cellophane, and the little fairy kids, who also had on cellophane costumes, had to scamper up and down the moon beams. There was a little panic, but it looked beautiful. It puffed with smoke and it all started to go. The kids scattered. A couple of them got singed a little bit, no damage really. But it was so beautiful. I loved it.

When I first saw Warner Brothers--all those trees painted silver on the set, the costumes, everything--I was completely bowled over. I wanted a studio all my own. And I never had one because in a way I really had a very scratchy career in the movies. It was strictly a one-shot deal. One movie, this one part, then my family put me back in school. There was no question of following the path of other child actors of the time.

*CA*: *After the film was completed, did you resume your traditional childhood*?

*ANGER*: Sort of. I was always a rather rebellious child. I wouldn't go to Sunday school. I did go to Beverly Hills High school, which at that time was kind of like a private club. It was pretty nice and there were a lot of the children of people in films; the girl who used to help me get through chemistry was Groucho Marx's daughter.

*CA*: *Did you work in films again*?

*ANGER*: Not in the industry, no. My father wanted me to go to California Tech and become an aeronautical engineer like my brother because the whole family was in aviation. It wasn't my trip; I wasn't going to do it. When I graduated from high school my grandmother gave me the money to go to Paris to meet Jean Cocteau. She had been there and had told me stories about it.

*CA*: *Then you met Cocteau*.

*ANGER*: Yes. I sent the film "Fireworks" to a festival called "The Festival of Damned Films." These were films that could never be shown publicly for censorship reasons or whatever. He was the chairman of the jury, and the film won a prize. He sent me just an honor, no money (which would have been welcomed). He also sent me a little fan letter and invited me to see his ballet "Le Jeune Homme de la mort."

*CA*: *Do you still have the letter*?

*ANGER*: Yes I do; I'm very careful. I have a collection of autographs, too. I was staying in Paris through the 1950's, where I wrote the first version of *Hollywood Babylon*. I wrote it to get some money to stay on in Paris. It was part of the trivia cinema thing. I expanded it in 1959 and came back to America to make "Scorpio Rising" in 1963. It was a little like visiting a foreign country. I had been away almost ten years. Brooklyn was as strange to me as darkest Africa.

*CA*: *Were you successful in Paris*?

*ANGER*: Yeah, I guess so. *Hollywood Babylon* was done strictly because I needed some money to work on my movie. Well, I'am a collector. I grew up in Hollywood and I've been collecting Hollywood memorabilia of all kinds since I was a child. A lot of things were given to me. I expressed an interest in film since I was five. At that time, since I had a few "ins" in the studio through my grandmother's friends, particularly at Warner Brothers, they would say, "Here kid, take the whole set," and they would give me a key book with a still from each scene in the movie. I still have them. I had an interest in collecting the history of Hollywood, not the corporate history, but the human stuff. And the human side is scandal, you know, the people in conflict with the mores of the time. Hollywood has always been a reflection of America in the sense of what goes, what won't go, what will wash, what they get away with, what they can't get away with. I think people talked because I was a kid. I was interested in the stuff and I was keeping notebooks on it from my childhood on, like a hobby.

*CA*: *What inspired you to make "Scorpio Rising"*?

*ANGER*: It came about out of a blue summer sky. I went to Coney Island, as I was wont to do in those days around 1963. Around the Cyclone there was this friendly gang of motor cyclists. Not Hell's Angels but a little Brooklyn gang of Italians who worked in the Fulton Fish Market. And they were showing off these incredible surrealist machines that they had built with ten tail fins and twenty exhaust pipes and fifty headlights at least.

I was really flipped out over these things and they let me photograph their parties, their private lives, their rooms. Working completely alone. I think if I had had a crew of even one or two people I never could have done what I did. Like going into their little garages and rooms and into their private lives, and they respected me as being a kind of a camera nut. You know the kind. It was more that me being around made them a little more exhibitionistic than they would ordinarily be. But it turned into "Scorpio Rising" and it was fun. I enjoyed making the film even though I was not emotionally involved. I always wanted to be a director. My childhood fantasy was having my own studio. I wanted to have a little Warner Brothers.

*CA*: *Did you think you were making an underground film or a studio film*?

*ANGER*: I gave up that idea years ago. I knew that I would never have an actual building that would be a studio. I was just doing it for myself. Even then, I had a certain audience. My films were distributed. But I never thought that I could do this because I'd be going to certain reach markets. actually, "Scorpio Rising," of all my movies, was called "box-office" by pauline Kael. It's had the widest screenings and it has made more money for me.

*CA*: *When "Scorpio Rising" came out and did so well, did you get offers from studios*?

*ANGER*: I had a little talk. I never went down to actually see them. But at that time things like "Easy Rider" were being made also.

*CA*: *Dennis Hopper, [director of "Easy Rider"] was a fan of yours*.

*ANGER*: So was Jack Nicholson, but they never said, "You should be making a big film." They never said, "Gee, you've got to meet this American International Pictures guy," you know. None of those things ever happened. And I am a little diffident about it, because I had this connection with Hollywood studios when I was a kid. I mean I never went hustling *ever*. I said, "If something comes my way and someone wants to talk to me, fine." But it just never happened.

*CA*: *"Scorpio Rising" contains associations between violence and sex. Do you always do this*?

*ANGER*: "Scorpio Rising" was a documentary. I was filming a phenomenon that happened. I didn't direct the phenomenon. I didn't add anything to the scene that was not there already. The only thing that I did add was my participation with the camera. And the fact that I believe quite strongly that with a camera in their presence, people act differently than when the camera isn't present. People exaggerate a little and show off. They were sweet innocent kids. They weren't vicious and nasty. They stole a few things. They weren't really bad. 1962 was the beginning of the Vietnam War. Several of them went off and got killed in the war.

*CA*: *But earlier films had similar imagery*.

*ANGER*: I mean the fact that I would make it. I was attracted to "Scorpio Rising" but I wasn't emotionally involved with it. Other films, like "Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome," I was emotionally involved with the people in the film. People like Anais Nin, whom I'd known since I was a teenager. It overlapped into her circle of people who also used to be interested in black magic, writers, sculptors.

It was not the Hollywood crowd.

*CA*: *Who are your favorite filmmakers today*?

*ANGER*: Leni Riefenstahl is the only living hero I know. She is a fantastic woman. She is incredibly talented. She is an incredible survivor. She makes still photographs now. She was one of the greatest filmmakers of the twentieth century. Films like "Blue Light," "Olympia," and "Triumph of the Will" are some of the greatest works. Whether they are selling Nazis or selling automobiles has absolutely nothing to do with it. They are gorgeous works of art. It has nothing to do with the ideology that she had then. She doesn't have it now. She said she had to do it. It was glamorous, powerful. Hitler was very puritanical.

Puritans are very dangerous people. I don't go to see modern movies. The only thing I liked about living in New York was that you can see good prints of beautiful old pictures more than anywhere else. The Museum of Modern Art shows thirty-five millimeter original nitrate prints of gorgeous things from the late 1920's and 1930's. They have a special fire permit. The film is very explosive. People see an old silent film and say, "That's so ugly. How could anyone have ever thought that was any good?" They are seeing a fifth-generation duplicate which has been copied five or six times. So it loses the sensuous glamour that the image had.

*CA*: *How can you write* Hollywood Babylon II *if you don't go to any movies now*?

*ANGER*: It's not a book about movies. It's a book about the people that make them.

*CA*: *If you don't see the stars' and directors' work, how can you really have a sense of what they're about*?

*ANGER*: I pick it up by osmosis. The last big Hollywood film I saw was "Close Encounters of the Third kind." [Director] Steven Spielberg mailed me the monkey from the film afterwards. He got the idea from "Scorpio Rising," that's why he did it.

*CA*: *What about Japanese films like "In the Realm of the senses?"*

*ANGER*: Maybe I'm missing something. But I have my life structured in such a way that I would prefer to go see an early RKO "B" picture.

*CA*: *Did you see "Star Wars"*?

*ANGER*: I liked some of the special effects. But the actors: I didn't like any of them. It would have been better as a comic strip.

*CA*: *Do you have any blatant dislikes*?

*ANGER*: I am a longer. My name when I was in grade school was "The Lone Ranger" only dropping the "r." I used to sing ranger songs. In other words I am totally disconnected with political parties. They`re all bluffs. Everyone is a rip-off. The ones that talk ideals are the worst.

*CA*: *So you've kept the same friends over the years*?

*ANGER*: Friends? Who said anything about friends? I don't have any friends. Truly. I am very proud of the fact that I have no friends. If someone says that they are Kenneth Anger's friend, watch out! Maybe they will say that after I've died, but you better check with me. I don't believe in friends.

CA:*What about Anais Nin*?

*ANGER*: She was an associate, but I would never say that she was a friend. In other words, friendship is something that I feel very strongly about because it's a swamp. I see more people disappear with just a few little bubbles over so-called friendships. Jesus Christ learned about friends. He had twelve friends and one of them turned out to be Judas. I feel that every disciple is a potential Judas. Magicians say that as long as you have twelve people together, one of them is going to betray you. I work alone. I'am independent.

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